

**THE FAMILY
LETTERS OF OLIVER
GOLDSMITH**

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The family letters of Oliver Goldsmith by Sir Ernest Clarke

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SIR ERNEST CLARKE

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OLIVER GOLDSMITH.

A PAPER READ BEFORE THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY,
OCTOBER 15, 1917.

BY
SIR ERNEST CLARKE, M.A., F.S.A.

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THE FAMILY LETTERS OF OLIVER GOLDSMITH.

BY SIR ERNEST CLARKE, M.A., F.S.A.

Read 15 October, 1917.

IN a paper which I was privileged to read before this honourable Society three years ago as to "New Lights on Chatterton," I mentioned incidentally that the researches of which that paper was the outcome had arisen out of the examination by me of a large bundle of papers that had been collected by Bishop Percy of Dromore, the editor of the famous *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, and had apparently remained unexplored since his death in 1811. The Chatterton documents were by no means the most important and were certainly the least puzzling of the array of miscellaneous papers included in this bundle, which contained not only a variety of notes about Shakespeare and other subjects which had engaged the Bishop's attention, but chiefly and most interestingly a large quantity of original letters written by and about Oliver Goldsmith.

To discuss in detail the whole of the questions arising out of these Goldsmith papers would really amount to writing a new life of that poet, which I have no intention of doing. There exist already many biographies of Oliver by writers of the first rank, and no fact of salient importance concerning himself remains to be revealed, whatever may be said as to his writings. There are, it is true, side-lights of some literary interest and value afforded by the papers that have come unexpectedly my way through

the kindness and generosity of the great grand-daughter of the Bishop by whose favour you have the advantage of personally inspecting the original letters which I shall presently describe: but this is not the occasion for minutiae concerning them.

What therefore with your permission I propose now to do is to deal only with the letters written by Oliver Goldsmith at various periods of his life to members of his own family and old friends of his boyhood resident in his native province, and to deduce from them some general reflections as to the warmth of his affections and the simplicity of his typically Irish character.

Thomas Percy, to whom we mainly owe the preservation of these letters, was almost an exact contemporary of Oliver Goldsmith. The latter was born on 10 November, 1728; Percy on 13 April, 1729. They first met on Wednesday, 21 February, 1759, as fellow-guests of Dr. Grainger, the author of the "Sugar Cane," at the Temple Exchange Coffee House, Temple Bar. Percy was then a bachelor clergyman with a college living at Easton Maudit in Northamptonshire, but with literary associations that kept him much in London; and Goldsmith was just emerging from the chrysalis stage of hack-work for the reviews and was lodging in a garret at Green Arbour Court near the Old Bailey. Percy met Goldsmith again on 26 February, at Dodsley's, for whom Oliver was preparing his "Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe," and on Saturday, 3 March, before returning to Easton Maudit, he paid a visit to Goldsmith at Green Arbour Court with the result expressed thus in Percy's own words:

"The Doctor was writing his Enquiry, etc., in a wretched dirty room "in which there was but one chair, and when he from civility offered it "to his visitant, himself was obliged to sit in the window. While they "were conversing, someone gently rapped at the door, and being desired "to come in, a poor ragged little girl of very decent behaviour, entered, "who dropping a curtsie, said 'My mamma sends her compliments and

"begs the favour of you to lend her a chamber-pot full of coal." (Percy Memoir, p. 61.)

Percy was introduced by Goldsmith to Dr. Johnson on 31 May, 1761, and the acquaintance with the great lexicographer and his literary friends soon ripened and grew more intimate. "The Club" founded by Johnson and Reynolds in 1764 included Goldsmith from the first: Percy and two others were admitted to the charmed circle rather later (15 February, 1768). When Goldsmith died in April, 1774, the general impression seems to have been that Johnson would write a biography of him for his "Lives of the Poets"; but difficulties of one or another sort—chiefly perhaps Johnson's inertia, for he was then a man of 65—intervened to prevent this: and eleven years afterwards, when Johnson himself was dead, Percy was stimulated by Edmond Malone to undertake the task himself.

It is not improbable that he had in his own mind long before this that something of the kind might have to be done by him, for there is evidence in the papers confided to me for examination that Percy had commissioned an inpecunious younger brother of the poet named Maurice Goldsmith to collect for him all the procurable letters written by Oliver to members of his family.

The biographers and commentators on Goldsmith have made much of an extract from a letter from Percy to Malone which is printed on page 237 of Vol. VIII (1858) of Nichols' *Literary Illustrations*; but they have been unaware of the letter from Malone to which it is a reply. This original letter of Malone is amongst those in the bundle which I have been exploring. It is dated from London on 2 March, 1785, and gives some interesting particulars as to Johnson's affairs. The essential parts as to Goldsmith are as follows:

"Soon after the death of poor Dr. Johnson, I mentioned to one of the executors that I had formerly given him a letter from Dr. Wilson, a fellow of the college of Dublin, relative to Dr. Goldsmith, who was his classfellow. I did not then know Dr. Johnson as well as I did

"afterwards, and improvidently gave him the original instead of a copy. "I therefore requested, if it should be found among his papers, it might "be sent to me. I suppose Dr. Scott, to whom I talked on the subject, "did not exactly recollect what I had mentioned, for about a fortnight "ago, a parcel of papers was sent to me marked at the outside "'Dr. Goldsmith,' as I imagine from the Executors (for I received no "note with them), who conceived they belonged to me. On inspecting "them, I found they consisted of some very curious materials collected "by your Lordship for the life of Goldsmith, which I shall take great care "of till I hear from you on the subject. I often pressed Dr. Johnson "to write his life, and he would have done so, had not the booksellers "from some clashing of interests in the property of his works excluded "them from their great collection of English Poetry. It is a great pity "that these materials should be lost. Why will not your lordship, who "knew Goldsmith so well, undertake the arranging of them . . . Dr. J. "used to say that he never could get an accurate account of Goldsmith's "history while he was abroad . . . Goldsmith's letters are surely charac- "teristick and worth preserving."

Percy no doubt asked for this bundle of papers to be sent to him in Ireland; and when it was received, he wrote from Dublin on 16 June, 1785, the letter to Malone which, as stated above, is printed in Vol. VIII of Nichols' *Literary Illustrations*:

"I have long owed you my very grateful acknowledgments for a "most obliging letter, which contained much interesting information, "particularly with respect to Goldsmith's memoirs. The paper which "you have recovered in my own handwriting, giving dates and many "interesting particulars relating to his life, was dictated to me by himself "one rainy day at Northumberland House, and sent by me to Dr. Johnson, "which I had concluded to be irrevocably lost. The other memoranda "on the subject were transmitted to me by his brother and others of "his family, to afford materials for a Life of Goldsmith, which Johnson

“was to write and publish for their benefit. But he utterly forgot them and the subject Goldsmith has an only brother living, a cabinet maker, who has been a decent tradesman, a very honest worthy man, but he has been very unfortunate, and is at this time in great indigence. It has occurred to such of us here as were acquainted with the Doctor to print an edition of his poems, chiefly under the direction of the Bishop of Killaloe¹ and myself, and prefix a new correct life of the author, for the poor man’s benefit; and to get you and Sir Joshua Reynolds, Mr. Steevens, etc., to recommend the same in England, especially among the members of The Club. If we can but subsist this poor man at present, and relieve him from immediate indigence, Mr. Orde, our Secretary of State, has given us hope that he will procure him some little place that will make him easy for life; and then we shall have shown our regard for the departed Bard by relieving his only brother, and so far as I hear, the only one of his family that wants relief.”

A scheme for publication of Goldsmith’s *Poetical Works* was set on foot in Dublin about this time, as appears from the following printed document found amongst the Bishop’s papers:

“Dublin, June 1, 1785.

“PROPOSALS for Printing by Subscription, The Poetical Works of Dr. Oliver Goldsmith; For the Benefit of his only surviving Brother. Mr. Maurice Goldsmith, to which will be prefixed, A NEW LIFE OF THE AUTHOR. In this will be Corrected Innumerable Errors of Former Biographers, From Original Letters of the Doctor and his Friends, but Chiefly from An Account of Dr. Goldsmith’s Life, Dictated by Himself to A Gentleman, who is in Possession of the Manuscript.”

The subscription price was to be a guinea, and subscriptions would be received by the publisher, L. White, No. 86, Dame Street. What happened to the money received for the subscriptions is not known;

(1) Dr. Thomas Bernard (1728-1806), who was also—like Percy—a member of The Club.

probably Maurice Goldsmith drew cash "on account" for most of it. Anyhow the book was never published.

If it had been set about at once, and been limited as proposed to Goldsmith's *Poetical Works*, and a Life of him compiled from the original materials collected by Percy, it would doubtless have been a success. As it was, the Bishop's episcopal duties and other preoccupations appear to have disinclined him to undertake the work himself, and he therefore placed it in other hands, with very unfortunate results to himself and to those members of the Goldsmith family for whose benefit it was intended. Maurice Goldsmith no doubt told his relatives of the pecuniary advantages that were in store for him when the work came out, and appeals for help reached the Bishop from the daughter of Henry Goldsmith, from the widow of Maurice, from Charles Goldsmith, and from a son of Charles named John Goldsmith. In the absence of the published work these appeals had to be met out of the Bishop's private purse, and involved him in much distressing correspondence with the impoverished relatives of his dead friend.

At what period Percy formed the idea of expanding the publication so as to include all Goldsmith's known works—prose as well as poetry—is not clear. Probably he was more concerned to see the Life written or at least in preparation. It must be remembered that he was exceedingly badly placed for now attempting work of this kind. He was in a remote part of Ireland where the posts were irregular and the magazines did not reach him till months after their issue. Writing to Malone on 16 June, 1785, he said: "I see publications about as soon as they would reach the East Indies." (*Lit. Ill.*, VIII, 237.)

He seems to have attempted to shift the burden of compilation of the biography on to a somewhat fulsome correspondent, Dr. Thomas Campbell, Rector of Clones. When, after a long interval, Campbell's efforts proved unsatisfactory, the Bishop tried as collaborator the Rev. E. H. Boyd, the translator of Dante, with equally disappointing results, Boyd, like Campbell,